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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that for second language learners to develop communicative competence, their instruction must address the sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic aspects of target language use. These three aspects of communicative competence are termed the "grammar of culture," and they are essential to understanding what is appropriate in intercultural communication. In support of this concept, a survey of 70 native speakers of Brunei-Malay that investigated their perceptions of native English-speakers' attitudes and language behaviors is reported. Subjects were first-year university students. The survey focused on perceptions of English-speakers' use of greetings and leave-takings in relation to levels of formality, intimacy, friendship, and abruptness in social encounters. Results suggest that different types of communicative style can damage the communication process, lead to misinterpretation and breakdown, and ultimately result in such problems as ethnic stereotyping and prejudice. Further study of intercultural communication and integration of cross-cultural training into second language instruction are seen as necessary to equip language learners with the skills for effective, confident communication. (MSE)

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TOWARDS TEACHING A "GRAMMAR OF CULTURE"

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ED 366 193

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TOWARDS TEACHING A 'GRAMMAR OF CULTURE'

David Marsh

1 INTRODUCTION

Language in its socio-cultural context is an object of interdisciplinary study which is without fixed boundaries or stable definitions. This area of study could be seen as analogous to Antarctica; claimed by many, explored by not so many, and understood by few. It is an area with riches that lie largely undisturbed though tapped for centuries by people from a variety of backgrounds, often with quite different intentions. Needless to say it also has a long line of victims in its wake.

Within this area of language study cross-cultural communication has attracted a considerable interest because it is here that the role of socio-cultural background knowledge is most visible, and hence open to analysis. It has invited a response from a wide range of academic disciplines, such as sociology, psychology, and education. These have understandably often approached the subject from different angles.

Linguists have sometimes been said to distance themselves from the social environment in which language is used, and 'concern themselves more with the study of linguistics than the study of language' (Halliday, 1977: 19). In recent years, however, there has been a new and powerful surge of interest in the study of language in relation to its proper context of society and culture. This tendency has been most evident in the fields of sociolinguistics and pragmatics which have provided valuable insight into how to improve the teaching of languages.

1.1 CONSTITUENTS OF COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE

Any second/foreign language teaching curriculum said to be communicative in orientation can be reviewed in terms of which types of communicative competence (Hymes, 1971) it aims to develop. This term originates from a rejection of the concept of ideal speaker-listener (Chomsky, 1965), in an attempt to produce a linguistic theory which incorporates language and culture. Hymes's original use of the term examined how the language learner acquired four key skills, namely, knowledge of what is possible, feasible, appropriate or what can be performed in a target language.

Approaching these skills from a pedagogic angle Canale (1983) describes four aspects of this competence: grammatical (what is formally possible); sociolinguistic (an understanding of social context, role, purpose); discourse (interpreting patterns and meanings) and strategic (use of strategies that people use in communication to accomplish goals such as for initiation, re-direction or repair).

Although the emphasis in this paper is towards spoken language and for the sake of exemplification, English, the aspects of communicative competence described relate to the teaching of both verbal and textual skills. If a curriculum which is designed for learners who aim to use the language in interpersonal communication lacks a clearly-defined approach to the development of the fundamental aspects of communicative competence, then it can be regarded as inadequate. It is possible that, in the past, some second/foreign language curricula have been regarded as communicative in orientation because of emphasis on the elicitation of learner-based talk and the transfer of information through spoken language. This attitude, if held, neglects the major function of language as a means for developing interpersonal communication through, for example, the creation and maintenance of relationships, negotiation of meanings and sharing of reality.

1.2 THE CULTURAL SPECIFICITY OF LANGUAGE

The sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic aspects of communicative competence are in the domain of what could be described as a 'grammar of culture' (D'Souza, 1988). This amounts to a description of the relationship between linguistic structures and recurring communicative patterns in a culture. It refers to features such as politeness phenomena (Brown and Levinson, 1978), questions of conversational implicature (Grice, 1975), pragmalinguistic features (Leech, 1983), and others (cf. Dittmar, 1976) which concern appropriacy and context.

The distinction between having knowledge of a language and understanding how to use it in social encounters has been described as a difference between structural and social competence (Edmondson and House, 1981). Social competence can be seen as involving mastery of social rules concerning context and talk, understanding conversational norms and having an ability to use certain organizational levels in conversation. In this paper social competence refers to the often demanding and highly significant aspects of using a language described above; namely, the sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic elements of communicative competence.

It is necessary to be highly cautious about how we use terms in any discussion of cross-cultural communication. There is a plethora of terms presently

used in academic and pedagogic discussion on this field. Some such terms actively inhibit understanding and others even attempt to disguise elitist and myopic views of different cultures and thus also the communicative styles they represent in human interaction.

For example confusion surrounds use of the term 'social competence'. It should not be used to refer to a set of objective behaviours found in the repertoire of a specific speech community. Rather we should see the components which make up a persons' social competence as a combination of relative processes, all dependent on culture, personality and at what point in time and in what context a specific communication takes place.

Some academics who discuss ways of teaching social competence in English to second/foreign language learners fall into an old trap; that of advocating that the teacher be prescriptive about teaching the 'cultural rules' of the target language. In so doing they erroneously indicate that rules of usage in the target culture are sets of objective behaviours and that the learners should learn these and use them when communicating in the target language. In a distinctly homogeneous speech community it may be justifiable to generalise about a specific set of cultural rules but with a language as international as English such description is problematic.

Scollon and Scollon (1981) compare the 'bush consciousness' of the Athabaskan Indians of North America with the 'modern consciousness' of the West. Although their work does not bear traces of cultural elitism their choice of terms is hardly constructive. However, it is not only choice of terminology which can provoke misunderstanding in this area. It can also be a matter of condescension. For example, Glenn (1981), Chief of Interpretation and Special Assistance for Intercultural Research for the US Department of State, manages to convey the idea that culturally-embedded ways of communicating are evolutionary in nature and thus the world comprises 'inferior' and 'superior' communicative styles. A compilation of problems emanating from modern published research on questions of cultural communicative styles lies outside the scope of this paper but are dealt with at length elsewhere (cf. Singh, Lele, Martohardjono, 1988; Verschueren, 1984).

In the study of cross-cultural communication we are faced with the following dilemma: on the one hand we must deal with and explain systematic cross-cultural differences. Such differences have been found to be reflected at all levels of language use and to be learned early in life, thus often becoming unconscious and difficult to change. They have their origins in long-established historical traditions and are maintained through networks of interpersonal relationships and, in cross-cultural encounters, can unwittingly result in miscommunication.

On the other hand, we have to study each interaction as a separate achievement on its own, and take into account the particular participants, their

background, their current state of mind, attitudes towards each other and willingness and ability to co-operate in the particular interaction. At the same time we must bear in mind the multiplicity of other situation-specific factors which affect the communication process.

1.3 TOWARDS A 'GRAMMAR OF CULTURE'

One way of approaching the concept of 'grammar of culture' in pedagogic terms is to attempt to describe a culture or speech community in terms of its frequently used communicative style. This is also called 'conversational style' (Tannen, 1984), which neglects the fact that a style is not restricted to speaking but can often be found in many forms of written communication which reflect politeness features often found in face-to-face encounters.

The notion of communicative style refers to a way of communicating characteristic to a particular group of speakers who share certain culturally-determined attitudes. It is closely linked to the views developed by Goffman (1959, 1967, 1974) in which the rules according to which a particular culture functions, influence the ways in which speakers transfer information and present images of themselves in social interaction.

In addition its use involves simplification of a host of complex aspects of human communication. One of the most obvious of these is the constant dilemma surrounding the pursuit of a definition of culture. This is particularly significant when we critically review the assumptions lying behind the existence of a communicative style because of the problem of asserting where culture ends and personality begins in the style(s) used by any particular person.

In our search for making our curricula fully communicative through paying attention to the sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic levels of language use, we need to avoid the quagmire surrounding the largely academic controversies concerning definitions of culture and personality. Seelye (cf. Robinson, 1987: 7) sums these sentiments up: I know of no way to better ensure having nothing productive happen than for a language department to begin its approach to culture by a theoretical concern for defining the term'. Adopting this view is not to be apologetic but pragmatic for once a language learner has proficiency in a target language, questions of communicative style should not be neglected.

The ways in which people from different backgrounds use language involve a set of cultural and social attitudes which influence how they choose to express themselves. The linguistic manifestation of such expression is often of secondary importance to the perceptions that the participants in a given situation may have towards what constitutes appropriate communicative behaviour. It is evident that a person's perception of a participant in a social encounter is not

formed by simply understanding the words, phrases, intonation or non-verbal language they choose to use but also by what he/she considers to be the intentions and attitudes of that participant. The ways in which people appear to judge the intent (and personality) of a speaker are strongly influenced by how that person appears in sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic terms.

There is evidence (cf. Thomas, 1983) which suggests that command of a second/foreign language in structural terms assumes a corresponding ability to use the language efficiently in interaction. In other words, if a person's structural capability is obviously faulty then 'allowances' are made more easily when communication fails due to apparent mis-handling of social features of language use.

1.4 ON TEACHING PRAGMATIC APPROPRIATENESS

When we teach a language through a communicative framework we aim to equip our students with skills which they will need to possess in order to function effectively in face-to-face encounters with native and non-native speakers. At times these encounters will involve a high degree of face-work and interactional complexity.

Interaction with native or non-native speakers of the target language, as with some second language students, is not necessarily advantageous in terms of understanding differences of communicative style. It cannot be assumed that experience of cultural diversity through communicating with people of different backgrounds can be directly linked to achieving social competence in the target language. On the contrary, such experience may fuel the development of prejudice and bias if not supported by insight into the workings of different communicative styles.

For example Thomas (1983) discusses how a person who spends many years living in a predominantly monolingual foreign language environment may not achieve a sufficient degree of social competence in the language of the country but continue to follow the conventions of their first language. The term 'pragmatic fossilization' is used to explain this phenomenon. It only constitutes a problem when such a person's intentions are frequently misunderstood and she/he is unable to communicate on an optimum level in the target speech community.

The question of teaching communicative style is not a matter of making qualitative judgements about good or bad ways of communicating. To do so is to impinge upon the autonomy that all human beings should have in the ways they wish to communicate with others. The teaching of pragmatic appropriateness is only concerned with extending the language learner's social competence through making him/her more aware of alternative ways of expressing meaning

in the target language. In addition it must be stressed that one does not need to embrace the values and attitudes of an alternative culture in order to study communicative style in a language learning curriculum.

English, for example belongs to the 400 million non-native and 350 million native-speakers said to actively use the language. Any speaker of English can only have access to and competence in some of the many variations of socio-cultural norms frequently reflected in the way this language is used throughout the world. This may be hard for the purist to cope with but it is a fact of life and one that must be reflected in language teaching. English belongs to each and every person who uses it and it is problematic to suggest that features of English found in some social circles in certain countries are superior or inferior to others. Equally we cannot attempt a prescriptive description of the shared conventions of native-speakers of the global language that English has become.

To reinforce the point that we should not attempt to teach sets of cultural attitudes to our students, let us take the case of predominantly monolingual native-speakers of English at universities in the UK and USA. Universities in both these countries are looking closely at the first language oral abilities of their students. Certain educated native-speakers of English are described as being 'verbally illiterate', which is probably not due to a mis-handling of structure but rather to an awkwardness in the use of the language as an efficient tool for conveying information and developing social relationships. As a result emphasis on communicative style is being actively incorporated into degree-level teaching.

When we teach pragmatic appropriateness in our second/foreign language learning curricula we describe those aspects of face-to-face encounters where our language learners face difficulties in adjusting to the cultural conventions followed by those with whom they communicate. We can determine what these difficulties are by conducting needs analyses which may reflect varying levels of empirical complexity. One such way of conducting a needs analysis which determines where rules of appropriacy in the target language may be different to those of the mother tongue is now described in this paper.

2 FINDING DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATIVE STYLE ACROSS CULTURES: A CASE STUDY

One of the most straightforward approaches to finding where significant differences exist in the communicative styles of two cultures, that is between those of the mother-tongue and target-language culture, is to use a questionnaire format. This could be fielded in a variety of different ways depending on the environment in which one teaches. For the sake of example we will look at the

sorts of questions which may reveal differences in communicative style where the language learners have some exposure to using the language with native and non-native speakers. All over Southeast Asia speech communities differ considerably with regard to the role which English plays and sometimes it is difficult to determine whether English is a second or foreign language. The needs analysis described in this paper was done with respondents who have English as a second language.

The questionnaire design attempted to find where adult language learners perceive differences to exist between Brunei-Malay and English on the sociolinguistic, discourse and strategic levels. It sought information on six key functions. These are (a) Greetings and Leave-takings; (b) Asking and Answering Questions; (c) Expressing Opinions and Feelings; (d) Frequency and Character of Speech; (e) Listening Behaviour and (f) Voice Tone and Body Language. A total of twenty-one questions were put to the language learners about these functions.

Depending on the extent of cultural homogeneity, maturity and target language proficiency of the group of learners involved, it may be interesting to obtain some background information about the respondents in this type of research. This initial probe might collect information on age, gender, mother-tongue, experience of contact with native and non-native English speakers, assessment of the degree to which they use English and description of the situations in which this occurs. Admittedly a teacher may already be in possession of this type of information if he/she is familiar with the background of the language learners but it is surprising how often this is not the case.

2.1 QUESTIONS ON GREETINGS AND LEAVE-TAKINGS

The four questions on this area seek to elicit attitudes towards greetings and leave-takings in relation to levels of (a) formality; (b) intimacy; (c) friendship and (d) abruptness in social encounters.

A question format may be:

Do you think that native-speakers of English tend to be:

(a) Much more
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less

formal in the ways in which they often greet you?

2.2 QUESTIONS ON ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Five questions on this area look at (a) asking personal or intimate questions; (b) asking about opinions and interests; (c) on being open in answering questions; (d) on how honest answers are perceived to be and (e) directness.

A question format may be:

Do you think that native-speakers of English tend to be:

(a) Much more
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less *direct and straightforward* in the ways in which they ask and answer questions?

2.3 QUESTIONS ON EXPRESSION OF OPINIONS AND FEELINGS

The four questions look at (a) expressing opinions on social, religious and political issues; (b) expressing personal opinions; (c) changing opinions frequently during conversations; (d) expressing opinions not believed in or really meant.

A question format may be:

Would you say that native-speakers of English are:

(a) Much More
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less likely to *express an opinion that they don't really mean or believe in than* XXXX-speakers?

2.4 QUESTIONS ON FREQUENCY AND CHARACTER OF SPEECH

Here four questions probe into (a) quantity of talk; (b) treatment of silence; (c) interrupting behaviour and (d) use of small talk (phatic communion).

A question format may be:

Do you think that native-speakers of English are:

(a) Much more
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less *likely to start speaking at the same time as someone else or to interrupt another person when talking* than XXXX-speakers?

2.5 QUESTIONS ON LISTENING BEHAVIOUR

The two questions in this section look at (a) being good listeners and (b) being overtly responsive in conversation.

A question format may be:

Do you feel that native-speakers of English tend to be

(a) Much more
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less *responsive in letting you know how they feel about what you are saying to them than* XXXX-speakers?

2.6 QUESTIONS ON VOICE TONE AND BODY LANGUAGE

Four questions on (a) use of voice as a means of expression; (b) expressing emotion; (c) use of facial expression and (d) use of gesture and body movement are used in this area.

A question format may be:

Do you think that native-speakers of English tend to be:

(a) Much more
(b) Somewhat more
(c) (About the same as)
(d) Somewhat less
(e) Much less *expressive of their emotions with gestures and body movements* than XXXX-speakers?

3 RESULTS OF AN ANALYSIS OF BRUNEI-MALAY SPEAKERS ATTITUDES TOWARDS USING ENGLISH WITH NATIVE-SPEAKERS OF ENGLISH IN BRUNEI DARUSSALAM

The type of needs analysis outlined above was used in 1988 with seventy first year university-level students who have Brunei-Malay as their mother-tongue. Many of these students had experienced extensive exposure to native-speakers of English, mostly British, during the course of their education. Thus the majority of the students had only used English as subordinates with native-speakers in teacher-pupil encounters. However most of the respondents had a high degree of exposure to English language TV and video media, the bulk of which originated in the USA. The sex ratio of the students was almost equal and their average age was twenty-one years old. The questionnaire was circulated in Malay. Respondents were encouraged to seek advice on questions which they found ambiguous before attempting to answer questions.

3.1 GREETINGS AND LEAVE-TAKINGS

The degree to which formality, intimacy and friendship are expressed in greetings and leave-takings were regarded as similar in English (E) and Brunei-Malay (BM). However, a significant proportion of the respondents (60%) found that in (E) people seemed to be more short and abrupt than in (BM) when greeting and leave-taking.

3.2 ASKING AND ANSWERING QUESTIONS

Forty seven percent of the respondents considered that in (E) people ask personal or intimate questions more often than in (BM). Fifty four percent stated that in (E) questions on opinions and interests were more commonplace than in (BM). In answering questions 56% of the respondents indicated that in (E) people are more likely to be open and candid than in (BM). A question on how honest a person is when they answer and ask questions reveals no significant difference. However, 74% of the respondents considered that in (E) people are more direct and straightforward in the way in which they put questions than in (BM).

3.3 EXPRESSING OPINIONS AND FEELINGS

Fifty three percent of the respondents considered that in (E) people express opinions about social, religious and political issues more often than in (BM). Seventy seven percent commented that overt expression of personal feelings and emotions is more common in (E). The respondents did not consider there to be any difference between (E) and (BM) in the degree to which people changed their opinions during the course of conversation. But on the question of speaking with conviction, 51% regarded the expression of opinions not really believed in or meant as more common in (E) than in (BM).

3.4 FREQUENCY AND CHARACTER OF SPEECH

Forty seven percent of the respondents felt that in (E) people used more words and spoke more than in (BM). Forty three percent suggested that in (E) people are less likely to tolerate periods of silence in conversation. Thirty nine percent considered that in (E) people are more likely to interrupt someone who is speaking than in (BM). Finally, 41% of the respondents felt that in (E) people use more 'small-talk' than in (BM).

3.5 LISTENING

On questions of appearing interested in hearing what a person has to say and responding to talk, 52% suggested that in (E) people are better at listening and 44% considered them to be more overtly responsive when talking than in (BM).

3.6 VOICE TONE AND BODY LANGUAGE

In this final section 52% of the respondents considered that in (E) people are likely to use voice tone more than in (BM) to convey meaning. Forty one percent considered that gestures are used more often in (E) when conveying emotions, 52% noted more use of signals conveyed by facial expressions in (E) and 48% observed that in (E) gesture and body movement is more widely used than in (BM).

CONCLUSIONS

Results such as these provide the teacher with some insight into where the second/foreign language learner may face difficulty in understanding the intentions of certain native-speakers of English. In face-to-face interaction in a second or foreign language participants often interpret the content of what a person says in direct relation to what they perceive to be the personality or intention of that person. The judgements that people make about others from different backgrounds may often be due to their not understanding differences of communicative style.

The different types of communicative style which exist between speakers can thus damage the communication process and lead to misinterpretation and breakdown. Instances of communicative breakdown may then affect the relationship between the speakers and, indeed, result in such problems as ethnic stereotyping and prejudice.

These results only reflect the opinions of the respondents involved and it is not possible to generalise the findings and talk of pragmatic differences in language use between English and Brunei-Malay. Analysis of cross-cultural talk is necessary before one can discuss the nature of those differences said to exist between the communicative styles under analysis. However, this sort of approach does give the teacher an immediate advantage in starting to see where differences are perceived as existing, which might, in some circumstances, threaten the successful outcome of communication in different situations.

Through this type of approach we aim to identify the problem; that is, how breakdown can occur through the misinterpretation of cultural values as they are revealed in communication. The importance we can attribute to this problem remains open to debate. However, studies on prejudice, ethnic stereotyping and conflict resolution (cf. van Dijk, 1984) do indicate that the statement "It's not what he said but the way he said it" is often uppermost in people's minds when things go 'wrong' in cross-cultural communication. Thus, as language teachers, we should start looking at what rules govern the 'ways' people express themselves.

Once we can ascertain where differences may exist what can we do about it in the classroom? We can instruct our students to be aware of the types of area, such as those above, which cause difficulty in cross-cultural communication between people of their own culture and those of others. Such training might encourage them to be prepared for problems and develop the resources necessary to repair communication which breaks down. This approach may be referred to as a form of 'consciousness-raising'.

Even only going as far as this is to achieve far more in this area than can be gained through teaching structurally-based objectives. Our interest here goes beyond mere structure and involves interactional considerations which is crucial if

we are to equip our language learners to be effective and confident communicators in the target language.

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